

THE 'REVIVAL' IN THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, c.1935–c.1956

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Metadata, citation and sin

ONE fruitful organizing theme around which to write the history of the worship of the Church of England in the early part of the twentieth century might be that of the revival of ancient practice. In church music, for instance, the early years of the century saw the gradual readoption of plainsong, the rediscovery of the repertoire of the Tudor and Stuart Church, and the adoption of English folk-song, most visibly in the *English Hymnal* of 1907.¹ In the placing of contemporary visual art in churches, however, the contrast is marked. Recent analysis of this period has tended to posit a Church largely indifferent to the visual arts, except for the activities of isolated individuals, and of two men in particular: George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, and Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester and formerly Vicar of St Matthew's, Northampton.² This sense was shared by Sir Kenneth Clark, former Director of the National Gallery, in a retirement tribute to Hussey, with whose patronage Clark had collaborated since the early 1940s. 'What' he asked 'has the Church done in the way of enlightened patronage of contemporary art in the present century?' Only one man, Hussey, 'has had the courage and insight to maintain – I wish I could say revive – the great tradition of patronage by individual churchmen'.³

¹ Brief surveys include Erik Routley, *Twentieth-Century Church Music* (London, 1964) 13–31; Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1979), 1: 315–38.

² The literature on the subject is very much in its infancy. For a brief general survey, see Michael Day, *Modern Art in English Churches* (London, 1984), 1–39. On Walter Hussey in particular, see Garth Turner, "Aesthete, Impressario and Indomitable Persuader": Walter Hussey and St Matthew's Northampton and Chichester Cathedral', in Diana Wood, ed., *The Church and the Arts*, SCH 28 (Oxford, 1992), 523–35; George Pattison, 'The Achievement of Walter Hussey: a Reflection', in Tom Devonshire Jones, ed., *Images of Christ: Religious Iconography in Twentieth-Century British Art* (Northampton, 1993), 13–16; David Coke with Robert J. Potter, 'The Cathedral and Modern Art', in Mary Hobbs, ed., *Chichester Cathedral: an Historical Survey* (Chichester, 1994), 267–82. On Bell, see Giles Watson, "In a filial and obedient spirit": George Bell and the Anglican Response to Crisis, 1937–49', *Humanitas* 1 (1999), 4–24.

³ Clark, 'Dean Walter Hussey: a Tribute to his Patronage of the Arts', in Walter Hussey, ed., *Chichester 900* (Chichester, 1975), 68–72, at 69.

Many and various voices in the period saw a need for a revival in ecclesiastical art. George Bell passed a faculty for a mural painting by Hans Feibusch in a Sussex church in 1954, to the approval of the architectural historian Alec Clifton-Taylor. In a letter to the *Times*, he praised Bell's 'courageous decision' that 'will have given much satisfaction to those who are concerned that the Church shall once again become what it was all through the Middle Ages, and to a less extent [*sic*] in the Stuart and Georgian periods too, a major patron of living art.'⁴ The sculptor Henry Moore noted to Hussey that Christianity had been 'the inspiration of most of Europe's greatest painting and sculpture – and the Church in the past has encouraged and employed the greatest artists'. However, this great tradition had become lost in recent years, and church art was often afflicted with an 'affected and sentimental prettiness'.⁵ John Rothenstein, Director of the Tate Gallery, argued that 'for a well-known artist to make a painting or a piece of sculpture for a church is news so startling as to be announced in headlines.' This was a recent phenomenon, rather than the norm, since 'in earlier ages the paintings and sculpture made to communicate the Christian message were amongst the supreme works of man.'⁶

This essay makes two distinct but related points. It sets aside the degree to which this attempted revival was a success, however defined, and also the veracity of Clark's sense of the uniqueness of Hussey's role in it. It seeks firstly to begin to sketch the web of connections between the clerical and artistic worlds, and to suggest that the impetus for and shape of this putative 'revival from above' derived in large part from an informal yet determined alliance of interested clergy, artists, and critics. Secondly, by examining both the similarities and differences of motivation among the constituent parts of this informal church-artistic 'establishment', it will suggest that the anticipated shape of this 'revival' depended on whose revival it was to be.

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The period immediately before, during and after the Second World War was characterized by a particular set of conditions under which debate on religious art was conducted within and on the periphery of

⁴ *Times*, 8 June 1954. On the Goring judgement, see Paul Foster, 'The Goring Judgement: Is it Still Valid?', *Theology* 102 (1999), 253–61.

⁵ Henry Moore to Walter Hussey, 26 August 1943, as quoted in Hussey, *Patron of Art: the Revival of a Great Tradition among Modern Artists* (London, 1985), 32.

⁶ John Rothenstein, 'Art in our Churches', *Picture Post* (19 May 1956), 27–9, at 27–8.

the Church of England; conditions which, whilst not unique to the Church of England, were uniquely operative within it. In 1944 George Bell convened a conference on the Church and the artist, to be held at the episcopal palace in Chichester, with the express intention of 'mutual interpretation' between the Church and the artist. Unsurprisingly, the conference was attended by local clergy and by Bell's Dean, Arthur Stuart Duncan Jones, but also by the Jesuit Martin D'Arcy of Campion Hall, Oxford, well known for his interest in the arts.⁷ The visual arts were well represented, with relatively conservative figures such as Charles Wheeler and W. T. Monnington rubbing shoulders with the more controversial Henry Moore and Duncan Grant. As well as architects Sir Herbert Baker, Edward Maufe and Francis Xavier Velarde, the critics T. S. Eliot and Eric Newton and the writer and Christian apologist Dorothy L. Sayers were also present.⁸ The list of attendees could scarcely have been bettered in range and eminence.

The present author has, with Ian Jones, elsewhere posited the existence of an informal church musical 'establishment', in which clergy and professional church musicians met, corresponded and debated with a concerned network of musicologists, professional musicians in secular contexts and other musical and cultural critics.⁹ Although considerably less well developed, the diversity and eminence of the assembled delegates at the Chichester conference suggest that a similar network for the visual arts existed in and around the Church of England. This network functioned in several ways. Both Bell and Hussey were assiduous correspondents and worked hard to ensure the involvement of the most influential voices in decision-making. A proposed painting by Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell in the parish church of Berwick in East

⁷ On Duncan Jones' membership of the Alcuin Club, see S. C. Carpenter, *Duncan Jones of Chichester* (London, 1956), 67. The new Campion Hall was furnished with a number of 'objets d'arcy': Edward Yarnold, 'D'Arcy, Martin Cyril (1888–1976)', *ODNB*.

⁸ London, Lambeth Palace Library [hereafter: LPL], Bell MS 151, fol. 186 (Bell's opening address to the conference); LPL, MS Bell 151, fol. 184 (programme and list of attendees). The Bell Papers are cited by kind permission of the Librarian of Lambeth Palace. A copy of Bell's summary of proceedings found its way to Hussey, probably through Moore. Chichester, West Sussex Record Office [hereafter: WSRO], MS Hussey 180. The Hussey Papers are cited by permission of the Very Reverend the Dean of Chichester and with acknowledgments to the West Sussex Record Office and the County Archivist.

⁹ Jones and Webster, 'Anglican "Establishment" Reactions to "Pop" Church Music, 1956–c.1990', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds, *Elite and Popular Religion*, SCH 42 (Woodbridge, 2006), 429–41, at 430. On the idea of a Christian elite, see Matthew Grimley, 'Civil Society and the Clerisy: Christian Elites and National Culture, c.1930–1950', in Jose Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003), 231–47.

Sussex went to a consistory court hearing in 1941, and Bell mustered, as witnesses in favour, Kenneth Clark and T. A. Fennemore of the Central Institute of Art and Design.¹⁰ Hussey's most prominent commissions of the 1940s, by Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, were unveiled by Kenneth Clark in the case of the Moore, and Sir Eric Maclagan, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, for Sutherland.¹¹

It was also the case that channels of communication were available for members of this network to communicate with each other and with the wider public. Periodicals such as *Theology* carried pieces on the relationship between the Church and the arts by clergy and theologians, but also by critics (Eric Newton of the *Manchester Guardian*) and art historians (T. S. R. Boase, director of the Courtauld Institute).¹² *The Student Movement*, a university term-time periodical from the press of the Student Christian Movement, carried a series of reproductions of modern works of art with accompanying commentary from (amongst others) Nikolaus Pevsner.¹³ Although the discussions were dominated by those within the established Church, they were not confined within it. Hussey corresponded in March 1944 with Iris Conlay, art editor of the *New Catholic Herald*, over her coverage of the Moore 'Madonna and Child'.¹⁴ John Rothenstein, as well as his work as Director of the Tate Gallery, sat on the advisory committee on decoration for Westminster Cathedral.¹⁵

This discussion was not confined to the religious press. Both Bell and Hussey were to be published in the artistic periodical *The Studio*, and *Vogue* carried a series of pieces on religious art in 1947–8.¹⁶ The *Architectural Review* published a debate on Henry Moore between the Christian critic Eric Newton and the self-confessed 'pagan' Geoffrey

¹⁰ Schedule of fees for consistory court hearing. WSRO, Episcopal Records, MS Ep.II/27, Berwick, Series B.

¹¹ The text of Clark's address is at WSRO, MS Hussey 335, and that of Maclagan at WSRO, MS Hussey 346.

¹² T. S. R. Boase, 'Religion and Art', *Theology* 46 (1943), 241–8; Newton, 'The Church and the Artist', *Theology* 48 (1945), 36–9.

¹³ The series ran monthly between 1946 and 1948, and included Moore's Northampton 'Madonna', and works by Georges Rouault, John Piper, Marc Chagall, Eric Gill and David Jones.

¹⁴ Conlay to Hussey (16 March 1944), and C. G. Mortlock (British Council) to Hussey (17 July 1944), both at WSRO, MS Hussey 333.

¹⁵ Jennifer Booth, 'Rothenstein, Sir John Knewstubb Maurice (1901–1992)', *ODNB*.

¹⁶ Edward Sackville-West, 'Art and the Christian Church', *Vogue* (March 1947), 64, 114, 120; 'Modern Church Art at Assy', *Vogue* (April 1948), 58–61.

Grigson, under the chairmanship of Nikolaus Pevsner, as well as comment on the early plans for the new Coventry Cathedral.¹⁷ The message was also carried overseas, with articles appearing in *London Calling* (part of the BBC's overseas work), the *Near East Post*, and the New York-based *Magazine of Art*.¹⁸

There was also a period in the 1940s and early 1950s when this discussion spread from the specialist press into the mainstream media. Hussey's work at Northampton was reported very widely in the local and national press, and John Rothenstein's article, noted above, was published by the mass circulation *Picture Post*.¹⁹ Broadcast media also took note, with Bell more than once appearing in *The Listener*.²⁰ Hussey was to take part in a television broadcast in 1948, alongside the artist Mary Kessel and the Keeper of Sculptures at the V&A, H. D. Molesworth, and chaired by the Archdeacon of London, O. H. Gibbs-Smith.²¹

What, then, were to be the features of this 'revival'? One vision, closest to the hearts of critics, was that of the clergyman as an enlightened individual patron. Kenneth Clark's tribute to Walter Hussey described the history of the Church's interaction with the artist as a highly personalized one, rather than one conducted through institutional structures. For Clark, 'the notion that Christian art at its best was the product of an institution is not borne out by history.' It was Hussey's qualities as 'aesthete, impressario and indomitable persuader' that had made him 'the last great patron of art in the Church of England.'²² For Eric Newton, Hussey had been successful in his commissioning of Henry Moore, a sculptor without a track record in religious art, because Hussey possessed the two necessary requirements: 'a courageous unprejudiced view of the theme . . . and a real understanding of the artist.'²³

¹⁷ '[Untitled article on Moore] *Architectural Review* (May 1944), 189–90; J. M. Richards, 'Coventry', *Architectural Review* 111 (January 1952), 3–7.

¹⁸ Eric Newton, 'Art and the Church Today', *London Calling* 283 (1945), 11–12; Iris Conlay, 'Modern Art Comes to Church', *Near East Post* (17 September 1944), 2; Benedict Nicolson, 'Graham Sutherland's *Crucifixion*', *Magazine of Art* (November 1947), 279–81; Kenneth Clark, 'A Madonna by Henry Moore', *Magazine of Art* (November 1944), 247–9.

¹⁹ See, *inter alia*, on the Moore 'Madonna', *Times* (21 February 1944), 6; for Rothenstein, see note 6 above.

²⁰ 'The Church as Patron of Art', *The Listener* (14 September 1944), 298; 'The Church and the Artist', *The Listener* (13 January 1955), 65–6.

²¹ Broadcast running order and script at WSR0, MS Hussey 205.

²² Clark, 'Walter Hussey', 68–9, 72.

²³ Newton, 'Art and the Church Today', 12.

A tension between the personal and the institutional can be seen in the different approaches of Bell and Hussey. Hussey worked on a highly personal level, becoming on several occasions a friend and confidante to those he commissioned, but leaving little institutional framework behind him at his retirement. Bell, by contrast, repeatedly attempted to put in place structures that might maintain the work of fostering art in the Church. He attempted to set up a guild of church craftsmen attached to Chichester cathedral, under clerical direction but functioning on a semi-commercial basis.²⁴ He also attempted to remodel the office of Treasurer at the cathedral to take on a diocese-wide role of fostering artistic work.²⁵

If an emphasis on reviving the patron-client relationship was one more characteristic of lay and art-critical voices, clerical commentators tended to invest the revival of Christian art with wider significance. A frequent theme in the discussion was the need to reverse the alienation of the worker from his labour, and the disconnection of the world of work from the Christian life. Much thought had been given in the early part of the period to the place of the worker in industrial civilization and how to make concrete the principle of '*laborare est orare*'.²⁶ John Betjeman told a congregation at Northampton of a state of 'mechanical barbarism' in which 'we let machines run our lives. We listen but we do not sing; we read, but we do not write; we feel, but we do not think; we buy, but we do not make; we judge things by money standards because money buys us escape from the roaring lunacy around us.'²⁷ For Bell, the engagement of artists in work for the Church was part of a wider vision of the nature of the church community and its relationship with its environs. 'Man's life, man's interests, man's gifts, should be brought there for a special consecration. . . . And in the offering of a man's gifts, his labour and his sacrifice, the art not only of the architect, but of the sculptor, the painter and the craftsman has each its peculiar signifi-

²⁴ See the leaflet 'A Guild Workshop for the Diocese of Chichester' (undated, but probably 1947) at LPL, MS Bell 152, fols 16–17. On the influence of guild socialism, see Grimley, 'Civil Society', 238–9.

²⁵ Hussey was Bell's preferred candidate for the vacancy that arose in 1948. Bell laid out his vision of the new post in a letter to Hussey of 16 November 1948: WSRO, MS Hussey 96.

²⁶ See, for example, the contributions of J. M. Heron and Philip Mairet in M. B. Reckitt, ed., *Prospect for Christendom* (London, 1945), 70–84 and 114–26.

²⁷ Sermon, preached 5 May 1946 at Hussey's invitation, and privately printed by St Matthew's: WSRO, MS Hussey 114, printed pamphlet *Five Sermons by Laymen*, 7–11, at 9–10.

cance.²⁸ Sir Eric Maclagan, in the same sermon series as Betjeman, meditated on the words of the catechism on the duty to 'learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.' It was thus for the artists to 'devote themselves to their Art . . . all serving God, certainly not only (perhaps in some cases, not at all) in specifically religious work.'²⁹ In this scheme, the artist had as clear a vocation to serve as the priest.

So it was that artists, critics and clergy saw a need for change at an individual, microcosmic level, but with different stresses placed on component parts of the synthesis. It was also the case that the 'establishment' pursued change at the national level. That there was a natural and inevitable causal connection between the life of a nation or civilization and its reflection and embodiment in the arts was deeply ingrained in much of the artistic thought of this period. The period under discussion here was more characterized by attempts to communicate and popularize that connection, utilizing theological work already in place from the 1920s.³⁰ John Rothenstein argued that, if the contents of twentieth-century British churches were the only evidence available to a later observer, 'our civilisation would be found shallow, vulgar, timid and complacent, the meanest there has ever been.'³¹ A. G. Hebert saw that in architecture 'the design expresses the spirit of a period and a civilization' and so 'sin likewise expresses itself in ugliness: the meanness and sordidness of modern commercialism has stamped its image on [parts of] Bristol and Birmingham.'³²

When handled by artists and critics, the importance of this organic relation between art and society tended to lead to an emphasis on the precise relation with *modern* art. Was a revival in the arts one that should draw on authentic roots (and that was therefore necessarily stylistically archaic) or one that should in contrast reflect the spirit of the age, and be therefore expressed in the most contemporary style of the day? For the critic Benedict Nicolson, Graham Sutherland, through

²⁸ Bell, 'The Church and the Artist', *The Studio* 124, no. 594 (1942), 81–92, at 87, 90.

²⁹ Sermon given on 26 May 1946. WSRO, MS Hussey 114, *Five Sermons by Laymen*. The connection may have been due to Maclagan's acquaintance with Earl Spencer, with whom Hussey was on good terms. Hussey, *Patron of Art*, 58–9.

³⁰ See, *inter alia*, Percy Dearmer, ed., *The Necessity of Art* (London, 1924) and his *Art and Religion* (London, 1924).

³¹ Rothenstein, 'Art in our Churches', 27–8.

³² A. G. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society: the Function of the Church in the Modern World* (London, 1935), 239.

his highly contemporary Northampton Crucifixion, 'voices the present crisis in civilisation.'³³ The mural painter Hans Feibusch identified a strong tendency in the Church to 'shirk the question of style and cling to long-established forms and symbols.' This was for Feibusch a dangerous policy of isolation, which 'tends to separate the Church and all it stands for still more from the rest of modern life and put it into a remote corner. The ordinary man who easily takes the Church for a relic from the past, does so not least for its appearance.'³⁴

Bell often stressed the necessary connection between art and contemporary culture. Religious art 'is not a thing which can be isolated from the general artistic movement of an age. Confine it and it becomes corrupted, its expression a dead letter.'³⁵ However, if critics and artists tended to express a rather static sense of the connection between a society and its art, it was the case that clergy and theologians viewed the arts as more instrumental in a dynamic process by which the Church was to revive and transform society at a national level. At its lowest pitch, this was expressed as a hope that the arts might provide a means of communication with the unchurched. Hussey suggested that a revived association between the Church and the artist 'would mean that Christian truth would be proclaimed in fresh voices, of increasing and lasting range, audible to many with whom the Church has unfortunately grown out of touch in recent years.'³⁶ Even if pictorial art was no longer the only means of educating an illiterate laity, as (it was often noted) had been the case in medieval England, it still had a role in communicating Christian truth.

This generalized missionary theme was transposed to a higher key by the general sense of societal crisis as the 1930s progressed, and during the war years. Bell, amongst others on the episcopal bench, was acutely aware that the sickness that had afflicted Europe could only be cured through a reconnection of European civilization with its Christian roots.³⁷ For Bell and others, the arts were both symptom of the

³³ Benedict Nicolson, 'Religious Painting in England', *New Statesman and Nation* (12 July 1947), 29.

³⁴ Feibusch, *Mural Painting* (London, 1946), 90–1.

³⁵ Bell, 'The Church and the Artist', 65–6.

³⁶ Hussey, 'A Churchman Discusses Art in the Church', *The Studio* 138 (1949), 80–1 and 95, at 95.

³⁷ On responses to crisis in this period, see Giles C. Watson, 'Catholicism in Anglican Culture and Theology: Responses to Crisis in England (1937–49)', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1998. See also Keith Robbins, 'Britain, 1940 and "Christian

malaise and part of its cure, for behind the actual war of 1939 there 'lies the spiritual war. There is a totalitarianism of democracy as well as of dictatorship. The life of the spirit is no less gravely threatened by the mechanisation of culture which the former causes than by the brutal tyranny of the latter.' Fundamentally, European civilization had fallen out of communion with its source. However, a hopeful sense that all was not lost became stronger in Bell's thinking as the outcome of the war became gradually clearer. 'Religion and art, the Church and the artist, may yet do something together again to transform the spiritual life of Europe. . . . There is a void in the human soul, crying out to be filled.'³⁸ The correspondence between Bell and Hans Feibusch suggests that the latter caught some of Bell's vision.³⁹ The horrors of the war meant that the naive and childish language of past religious art would not do in the new world of 1946: 'Only the most profound, tragic, moving, sublime vision can redeem us.'⁴⁰

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Strikingly absent from the voices that could be heard in connection with religious art in this period were those of the non-specialist laity. Hussey stressed on several occasions that the congregation of St Matthew's had, with a little perseverance on their part, come to accept and indeed love Moore's 'Madonna and Child', despite the opprobrium heaped upon it by the local press.⁴¹ However, despite this, the prevailing sense was that this was a revival that would require leadership, and that would attract lay opposition. Kenneth Clark told the Northampton congregation that the Moore sculpture 'may worry some simple people, it may raise indignation in the minds of self-centred people, and it may lead arrogant people to protest.'⁴² The work of Robert Hewison has described a wider project of cultural elevation in the post-war years, in which the masses, so sorely tested during the war, should share in the treasures of high culture, disseminated by a national cultural bureau-

Civilisation"', in Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (London, 1993), 195–213; Philip Williamson, 'Christian Conservatives and the Totalitarian Challenge, 1933–40', *EHR* 115 (2000), 607–42.

³⁸ Bell, 'The Church and the Artist', 90, 81.

³⁹ Watson, "'In a filial and obedient spirit"', 12–13.

⁴⁰ Feibusch, *Mural Painting*, 92.

⁴¹ Hussey, *Patron of Art*, 47–8, 73.

⁴² Printed in the *St Matthew's Magazine*, copy at WSRO, MS Hussey 335.

cracy.⁴³ The picture that emerges from an examination of this attempted revival in Christian art was of a movement dominated by a determined coalition of religious, artistic and cultural experts. This essay has eschewed direct consideration of the actual success or otherwise of the attempt. However, as Kenneth Clark's tribute to Walter Hussey (quoted at the beginning of this essay) suggests, there was little sense among the members of this coalition that anything more than a start had been made. Much fundamental research remains to be done on the period after 1955, but it may be suggested that the ubiquity of the visual arts in the cathedrals at the time of writing should be viewed as a more recent achievement.

It is also the case that the varying standpoints of the stakeholders in this process account for the differences in emphasis. Critics and artists, and the cultural bureaucrats who supported them, tended to analyse the situation in static terms. It was simply in the nature of things that the national Church should be a major patron of the contemporary artist, both for the sake of the artist at local level, and to reflect the natural connection of religious art and national culture. Clergy were more likely to be proactive, and to view the arts as instrumental in a revival of Christian thought and practice both personal and collective, particularly under conditions of perceived crisis during the war years. In beginning to understand this attempted revival, then, it is necessary both to consider precisely what it was that was to be revived, and also whose revival it was to be.

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⁴³ Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture and the Cold War, 1945–60* (London, 1981).